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VI.

THE PERMANENCE OF POLITICAL FORCES.

PART I.

I PROPOSE in these papers concisely to indicate some of the principal forces agitating society and shaping the national life at three of the most momentous periods of our history ; and, from the light they throw into the future, to ascertain, as far as may be—

I. In what direction the political opinion of the country is tending, and the bearing of this on the next Presidential election.

II. What will be the outcome of the demand by a third political party for a national fiscal system based on an inconvertible currency ?

There is reason for considering these two questions independently, since, in the scheme of political government, finance is but one element, the degree of its importance being measured by the industrial activity of the people. With a people so highly industrial as ours this element must always be of very great importance, but its influence is far inferior to that of moral or intellectual questions. Finance was not a cause or one of the causes of the civil war, and it is not the basis upon which stand the two political parties which divide the country. These parties, under whatever successive changes of name known, represent two fundamentally distinct principles of government, which are constant. Absolute faith in the one or the other does not preclude diversity of opinion upon the proper financial policy which a given state of affairs may call for. Hence there has been much shifting of ground by the two chief parties on financial interests ; while those parties which have in the past made them their sole basis of being have been independent organizations, having but a brief separate existence.

The two differing principles of government referred to, from the men who in this country were their most brilliant exponents,

may be entitled, respectively, the Jeffersonian and the Hamiltonian ideas. The latter contemplates the lodgment of large powers in the Government ; the former, the reduction of the powers of Government to a minimum. The extreme of the one idea is license ; the extreme of the other is despotism. The question before us is, briefly, Of which party representing these two creeds will be the next President ? We must look into the past for light upon it ; and, in passing, I would remark that he who begins his study of the politics of the United States with the Declaration of Independence begins it in the middle.

All the great changes effected from the earliest colonial period in our system of government have been those incident to a growth constant, though not steady, in two directions : first, to bringing every person living under it to an absolute equality in political rights and privileges ; second, to a centralization of power in the general, with corresponding abstraction of it from the local governments. To assign an exact date for the beginning of the first of these movements is difficult, but perhaps as good a date as any is that when the harsher features of the old colonial laws regulating the relations of indentured servants to their masters began to be softened ; its last and grandest effort was in the elevation of the whole slave population of the United States to personal freedom and political equality. About a century and a half divides the beginning from the end, but the onward course of the movement may be traced through all. The progress of the second movement is evidenced in the growth from the loose tie which held the colonies together under the British Crown to the close-knit force of the General Government of to-day, which places its supervisors beside every State ballot-box, and must, in the natural order of things, soon add to its other powers of local control the regulation of the railroad system of the country.

It may seem to many a wide jump from the colonial era to the Government of to-day. Not so. Continuity appears through all the current of our history. We have never known (as France, for example, has experienced) the violent overthrow and reconstruction of revolution. The war of independence made no wider gap in our politics than the civil war has made. For, if we look back, we find that every colony previous to independence had a representative form of government, which, in all its main features and in its practical working, had been shaped by the people who lived under it. Differ as they might in form, as proprietary, provincial, and charter

governments, substantially every colony had the same rights and privileges, with full powers of local control, but all owing a common allegiance to the General or Crown Government. They became independent, and by war ; but independence was not the original object of that war. Independence did not come until battles had been fought and victories gained, and it had become plain to all men that the war must be a long one, instead of ending, as had been hoped and expected, by reconciliation after one campaign. The Declaration of Independence was, in fact, a pure war measure ; just as much so as was the Emancipation Proclamation, to which it has many features of strangely-close resemblance. Hostilities were commenced, not to gain political rights which had been withheld, but to prevent the loss of a political independence already enjoyed. The national grievance was that the people's rights had been infringed. The attempted infringement provoked the war ; the war conserved those rights through independence. A comparatively slight degree of change was necessary to transform the colonial to State governments. The people of each took things as they were. They all curtailed the powers of the Executive more or less, and generally broadened the basis on which the Government rested ; but in no one State did this go to the extent of introducing universal suffrage. This is a comparatively recent comer among us. Jefferson in after-years could speak very slightly of the progress then made toward true democracy.

So far, then, as the State governments were concerned, the Revolution made but slight immediate change in them. The great change was made in the character of the General Government. The war produced the first great and decisive movement toward centralization. Extreme jealousy of the authority of the General Government had always been a characteristic of the colonies ; but in the first flush of enthusiasm against its aggressions, a General Government was constructed of unlimited authority. The Continental Congress which declared independence, and declared by that act that the colonies were an independent people, was elected under no limitations ; its powers were coextensive with the objects for which it was brought into existence. For the time, the demand of the people was for nationality. They elected a Congress to give them this. We remember Patrick Henry's famous exclamation that he was no longer a Virginian but an American. It was a fire of fusion which burned fiercely through all the country ; but it was a fire destined soon to burn out. Long before hostilities had ceased,

reaction against the impulse to centralization had reduced the General Government to insignificance. It had come to be regarded with a jealousy scarcely less than had been felt toward the Crown Government ; and we find, a little later, the Virginian orator who had so eloquently declared the throwing down of all State barriers, vehemently opposing the adoption of the Constitution, as proposing a system of government too centralized for liberty. The outcome of this reaction was the Articles of Confederation, in which the attempt seemed to be made to restrict the General Government to the same powers and usages it had been conceded that the Crown Government could exercise. At best, it was an attempt to make the forms of the past serve the needs of the present ; and the omission to give, what the Crown Government had, a power of coercion, made failure immediate and certain. In this we have the first movement to centralization and the reaction which followed it. The second movement was the adoption of the Constitution.

Universal disorder, powerlessness, and threatened dismemberment of the nation compelled the adoption of the Constitution. Practically, there had been no General Government since the reaction against the Continental Congress had begun. The State governments only had an existence. The eminent men who framed the Constitution proposed to give the national Government the forms and a like degree of power with that of any one of the State governments. The Constitution did not create new, it redistributed existing powers. It was a reorganization it proposed to effect, not a subversion. There was no function of government that the Constitution vested in the United States which was not already exercised in the fullest activity by the governments of the several States ; or partially and ineffectively by the then existing Congress, which in embryonic forms had judicial as well as legislative powers. Nevertheless, the majority of the people, the farming and planting classes especially, saw in the new instrument only a proposition to establish a monarchy disguised under republican forms. To them it seemed that "the cradle of the Constitution would be the grave of republican liberty." A national Executive was the great bugbear. It looked too much like a king. Neither could they see, nor could any man see, exactly to what extent the powers of the national Government could be pushed under this new system ; and most assuredly the Constitution would have been rejected, had not its rejection seemed to cast aside the last hope that remained of saving the country. It was adopted reluctantly, under the pressure of universal distress. In

this we have the second great movement toward centralization. It was less radical than the first, but it was more permanent. The reaction was not long in coming ; and it came despite the incalculable benefits the Constitution conferred on the country. In creating a real, potent, and practical national Government to control the States, it gave to the country what it needed—rest and stability. At the close of Washington's second term an immense improvement had taken place in the affairs of the nation. Its agricultural and commercial wealth had increased beyond all former example ; its foreign relations had been placed on a vastly better footing than they had been under the Confederation. Confidence had returned to trade ; commerce had expanded. Nevertheless, though these things were due to the success of the Federal party, which had saved the nation from dissolution and ruin, in proportion as the burden of distress was lifted from the country, the forces of reaction against the policy of federation ran stronger. The Constitutional or Federal party grew weaker and weaker, until, twelve years after the adoption of the Constitution, the party which had so bitterly opposed its adoption elected Jefferson to the Presidency and obtained complete control of the Government. They held it with but slight interruption from 1801 to 1860. During that time the ideas which Jefferson represented continued to work in the public mind, until another great crisis gave another powerful impulse toward centralization.

I suppose that no lengthy argument will be demanded here to prove that the national Government received such an impetus through the civil war. Had the Government been confined in its operation strictly by the terms of the Constitution, there must to-day have been two or more confederacies dividing what were once the United States. It disregarded statutory limitations ; it assumed every power deemed essential to the preservation of the national life. Its authority for the time being was strictly analogous to that exercised by the Continental Congress anterior to the adoption of the Articles of Confederation. What was done was done because the people temporarily consented to it. An immense moral force would be acquired by the Government simply from the fact that it had exercised these extensive powers ; but, from the necessities of the situation, much of this moral force was given concrete shape by certain amendments made to the Constitution, which permanently vested in the General Government large rights of control over what before were exclusively State concerns. The full scope

of these amendments still remains to be judicially decided. They have, however, been found broad enough to authorize the virtual creation and maintenance, and the summary dissolution, of State governments. But whatever may or may not be the complete fullness of the powers which the General Government derives from them, they stand to-day as the enduring evidences in the organic law of the nation of the third and last great movement toward centralization which has taken place in a century of our history.

It can scarcely be necessary to inquire whether this movement has also been followed by a corresponding reaction, because the simple fact that the Republican party is now a minority in both House and Senate is of itself sufficient evidence. If we compare the progress of this reaction, so far as it has gone, with that which followed the last preceding movement toward centralization (i. e., the adoption of the Constitution), it will be found to be a little slower and yet wonderfully close. The terms of Presidents Lincoln and Johnson must be excluded from the comparison, in that they were both concerned with war. We must begin with Grant, whose famous "Let us have peace" struck the keynote for the country. General Grant went in on a flood-tide of popularity, the Republicans being then at the height of their power. Like Washington, he was the successful soldier of the war. At the close of his first term, the opposing political party was still so weak that they did not dare to hope for success with a candidate of their own, though the Republican party was split with disaffection. Grant was reëlected by an overwhelming majority; Washington was reëlected unanimously, though great fears were felt that he would not be. But at the close of the second terms of both Grant and Washington we find a vast change come over the spirit of the parties. The Democratic party, though confronted by the united strength of their opponents, went into the canvass with Tilden against Hayes as confident and aggressive as were their predecessors when they nominated Jefferson against Adams. We know the disputed result; but this much is undisputed, that Tilden was defeated by one vote only; and we know that by one vote Jefferson was defeated. The next Presidential election will be the same in the order of progression from the first election of Grant as that of 1800 was from the first election of Washington, when Jefferson was elected. It happens also that the election of that year turned on the vote of New York, as the next one will. The battle-ground of the contest was this State, and will be again.

The question which now presents itself is whether the processes of reaction from the centralizing movement of the civil war have so far exhausted their force that they may be overcome by new forces arising favorable to the Republicans. If not, they should produce their legitimate result in the election of a Democratic President in 1880.

Let me briefly recapitulate. I have said that the political movement of the nation had been in two lines of direction. In the line of bringing all classes of the people to a political equality, this movement has been in accord with the Jeffersonian idea, and we find that the successive changes of statutes and constitutions tending to this result have in all cases been received with great popular favor, whichever party had the credit of them. But in respect to the several impulses toward the Hamiltonian idea, of a strong central Government, this does not appear. They have come from no popular liking for them, but under sharp and severe pressure. The effort being made, reaction has followed. It followed the first great outburst for nationality, and stripped the Continental Congress of nearly all its powers ; it followed the acceptance of the Constitution, and overthrew the party which had secured its adoption ; it has followed the civil war, and the party which brought it to a successful termination is a minority in the national councils. In each of these instances the student of history, in surveying the whole ground, can see many reasons why such reactive processes should not have taken place, and only one why they should. But that one is more powerful than all the others. It is that the majority of the people are by instinct Democratic and only by reason Republican. That is to say, they are temporarily the one and permanently the other. The Republican represents the party of action. When a great work has to be done, this party will be in the ascendancy ; when it has been done, the Conservative party succeeds and enjoys the fruit. This also is noticeable : There is never any undoing of the work done. The people took back the powers they gave the Continental Congress, but they did not return to their allegiance to the British Crown ; they overthrew the Federal party, but they did not disturb the governmental system that party had established ; they have reduced the Republicans to a minority, but no sane man questions the validity of the constitutional amendments or reasserts the doctrine of secession. Reaction in politics is in the nature of rest after effort ; and so far as it is now acting it must be calcu-

lated as a force working in favor of the party which represents the Jeffersonian idea of government.

I count among the forces working against this, the feeling of alarm aroused in the country by the action of the present Congress. When the plainest dictates of common sense pointed out as the proper course a policy of quiet and political inactivity, only a blind greed to grasp fruits already ripening to their fall could have prompted the measures of the extra session. Its folly, I believe, is now generally recognized ; but not before it had turned the eyes of the people once more to General Grant as the man to rescue the country from threatened dangers. A cry for "the strong man" is heard. Such a cry was heard toward the close of President Adams's Administration, and we have the evidence that the Federalists desired to again put Washington in nomination, as General Grant is talked of now. Just as it is now, it was the fear of danger from the South which prompted the movement. And the danger then was about as great as it is now. The work which the Nationalists of 1776 did, which the Federalists of 1789 consolidated, has never been undone. The work which the Republican party has done, no other party will ever undo.

CUTHBERT MILLS.